

NATIONAL

VERÓNICA tries not to attract attention as she drives around San Antonio.

Life in the Shadows

As one of 12 million illegal immigrants in the United States, Verónica struggles to protect her family's middle-class life in Texas

By Lizette Alvarez in San Antonio



Verónica keeps her foot steady on the gas pedal. She turns onto a side street, where trouble is easier to avoid. A yellow traffic light flashes and she stops; running it is not an option.

Verónica, 31, does not take chances. Six years ago, she took the biggest chance of her life by coming to the United States illegally from Monterrey, Mexico, with her husband and three children. Now she has too much to lose.

Border Patrol agents routinely monitor the main roads near her house on the outskirts of San Antonio, so Verónica and her friends and relatives have informal alert networks.

"My husband just called to tell me he saw them right now on the street," she says before leaving the house. "We're careful." (To protect her identity, Verónica's last name is not being published.)

Verónica is proud of what she and her family have accomplished since coming to the U.S. They have a small stucco house with two used cars in the driveway. Her husband, José,

has a job other immigrants covet: \$15 an hour working for a boss who offers no benefits but gives generous gifts like a refrigerator and a washing machine. She now has four children who speak English and stay out of trouble, including a 17-year-old and an eighth-grader who's an honors student.

POVERTY IN MONTERREY

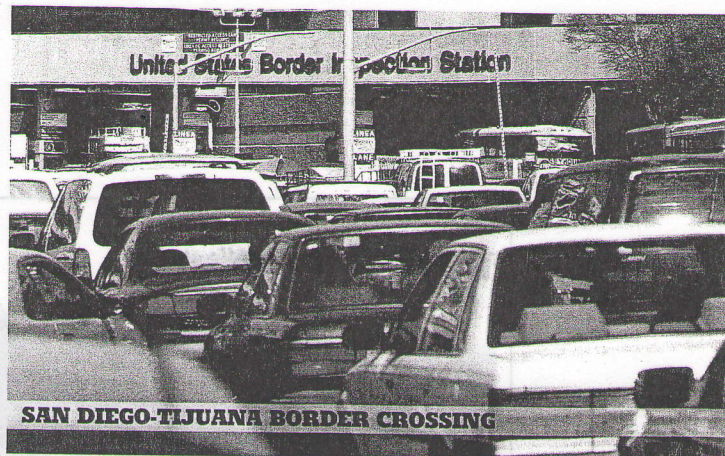
Her life here may not seem like much, Verónica says, but back in Mexico, she lived in houses with cardboard walls and zinc roofs. Growing up, she shared a damp box spring with eight siblings and coffee cans to catch the rain.

There are an estimated 12 million illegal immigrants in the U.S. Like Verónica's family, many lead quiet, ordinary lives. Still, many Americans are troubled by their presence, believing that they drain resources, take jobs from citizens, and refuse to learn English. Lawmakers have been considering ways to overhaul the nation's immigration system and tackle the problem of illegal immigration (see p. 13).

Like millions of other illegal immigrants, Verónica and José



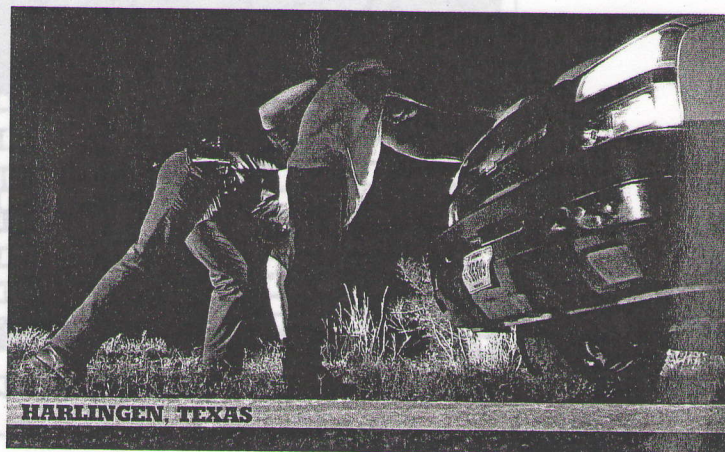
MONTERREY, MEXICO



SAN DIEGO-TIJUANA BORDER CROSSING

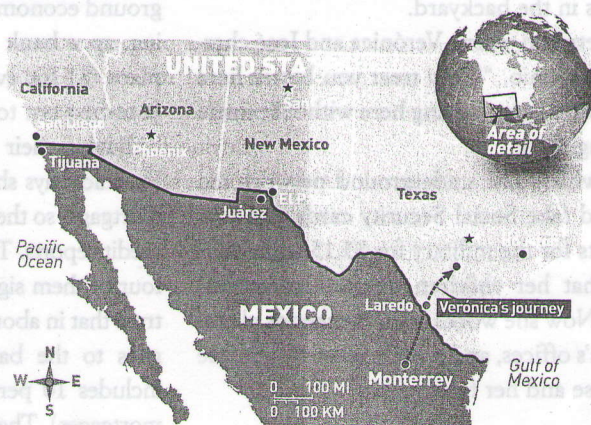


LAREDO, TEXAS



HARLINGEN, TEXAS

VERÓNICA'S LIFE in Texas is a big improvement over the poverty in which she grew up in Mexico (top left). Like many illegal immigrants, she entered the U.S. as a tourist through an official border crossing (top right). Now, however, she lives in fear of being stopped by border patrol agents (bottom left and right) asking for IDs she doesn't have.



first entered the United States on tourist visas, which they were able to get from the American consulate in Monterrey. The family was waved in at the checkpoint in Laredo.

Verónica's visa is still valid for five more years, but there are conditions. She can stay only for six months at a time and cannot work. Verónica has violated both rules, making her an illegal immigrant.

In a country where many people seek the spotlight, Verónica prefers to shrink into the background of her modest neighborhood and operate within its safety zones, an area of about five square miles where people don't ask her to flash cards she doesn't have: insurance card, credit card, green card.

She doesn't dare drive the 200 miles to Houston to visit her cousin. The road, so open and busy, is too risky. That

popular little taco restaurant on the road about a mile away? Verónica heard it was a favorite stop for Border Patrol agents.

It took her five years to get a driver's license because she heard it wasn't safe for an illegal immigrant to apply. "We were

afraid to go and get it," she explains. "But then you meet people who have done it, and you figure out it's OK."

'BETTER THAN LIVING THERE'

No rules are too small for Verónica, and she tries hard to live as a lawful illegal immigrant, an oxymoron she shrugs off.

Her husband, who works 50 hours a week as a machinist, relaxes after work by fixing up old cars. One day not long ago, a code-enforcement officer told him that broken-down

Lizette Alvarez is a domestic correspondent for The New York Times.

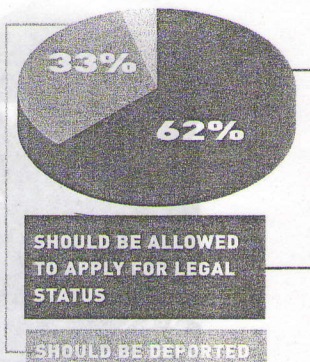
WALT HANDELSMAN Newsday



AMERICA'S MIXED MESSAGE...

VIEWS ON IMMIGRATION

What should happen to illegal immigrants who have been in the U.S. for at least two years?



cars had to be kept off driveways. Verónica panicked, and José now fixes the cars in the backyard.

Despite all the anxiety and worry, Verónica and José cherish their lives in San Antonio. "They treat you better here than in Mexico," Verónica says. "Living here without papers is still better than living there."

She worked for a while. The underground network led her to a man who sold fake Social Security cards and to a factory job making cots for the military for \$5.15 an hour.

But she worried that her children weren't being well cared for, so she quit. Now she works some weekends cleaning her husband's boss's offices, and spends most of her time taking care of the house and her family.

PAYING TAXES

Verónica is grateful to be here, even as a shadow. But she feels she earns her keep. "I get angry when you hear on television that we don't pay for things and don't pay taxes," she says.

She yanks her property-tax bill out of a file. It is more than \$1,800. Her home-insurance bill is \$713 a year. And while Verónica works off the books and does not pay taxes on her wages, her husband has Social Security taxes deducted from his paycheck—even though he bought his Social Security card on the black market and will never receive benefits.

Verónica and José have learned to navigate the underground economy to get ahead. At first they shied from opening up a bank account, but the fees at the check-cashing place (\$1 for every \$100 cashed) made them take a chance. It turned out to be easier than they thought.

Buying their house was trickier. Without a credit history, Verónica says she didn't even think about asking a bank for a mortgage, so they took another route, one without lawyers and credit reports. They met with the owners of the house and the four of them signed a piece of paper, banking on nothing but trust that in about 15 years the house would be theirs. Verónica goes to the bank every month and deposits \$537, which includes 10 percent interest (a much higher rate than most mortgages). That money pays off the owners' mortgage.

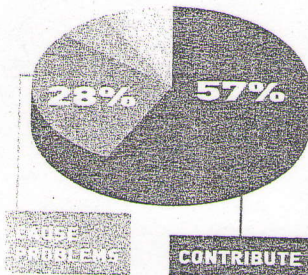
Verónica worries that the house could be taken from them—by the government or by the owner. "The owner is a nice person," she said. "But who knows? It is in God's hands."

By far the biggest hardship is being separated from their family in Mexico. Calling is expensive, and the Internet is not an option; her family in Mexico is not wired.

When his father died, José could not go home for the funeral because he didn't want to risk getting stranded in Mexico. "To not go and put flowers on his father's grave, that is hard," Verónica says. "He still cries about it."

One of the ironies of the recently beefed-up border secu-

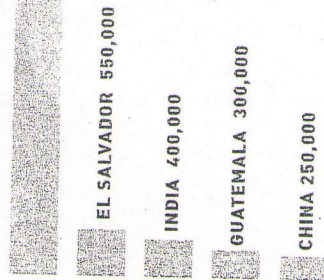
Do you think that most recent immigrants to the United States contribute to this country, or do most of them cause problems?



TOTALS MAY NOT ADD TO 100 PERCENT BECAUSE OF ROUNDING

BASED ON NATIONWIDE PHONE INTERVIEWS WITH 1,125 ADULTS, MAY 18-23

TOP 5 SOURCES OF ILLEGAL IMMIGRANTS IN THE U.S.



SOURCE: PEW HISPANIC CENTER (2005 ESTIMATES)

rity is that Mexicans who once moved frequently back and forth—going to the U.S. to work for a while, then returning to Mexico—are now staying put north of the border. They don't want to risk not being able to get back into the U.S.

'TOO BIG A SCARE'

Three years ago, Verónica lost her willpower and went back to Mexico for a visit. At the border on her return to San Antonio, inside a car with a legal resident, she was questioned. The border patrol agent had found her Texas state identification card in the computer database, a giveaway that she was not a tourist.

Her heart racing, Verónica concocted a story on the fly. Somehow it was convincing enough, and the border agent waved her through.

"It was too big a scare," Verónica says, vowing never to try such a journey back to Mexico again. "I won't risk the future of my children." @

SOME LAWMAKERS want to build more border fences like this one in Tijuana, but the fences and other security measures don't keep all illegal immigrants out.

